



A Gender-Equal Utopia?

Press Coverage of Women Politicians In The Danish Media

Fiig, Christina

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A GENDER-EQUAL UTOPIA ?
PRESS COVERAGE OF WOMEN POLITICIANS IN THE DANISH MEDIA

Ph.D. Christina Fiig
Associate Professor
Aalborg University
Department of History, International and Social Studies
Centre for Gender Research
Fibigerstraede 2
DK-9220 Aalborg East
Denmark
cfiig@ihis.aau.dk

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Associate Professor, Ph.D., Christina Fiig, Aalborg University, Denmark (cfiig@ihis.aau.dk)

1. Introduction ¹

In a number of ways, the Nordic countries appear to be *sui generis* when it comes to majority women's political mobilisation, participation and representation. Since the 1970s, the countries have been talked about as 'a laboratory of gender equality' (Gomard & Krogstad ed. 2001) concerning political representation in formal political institutions but lately their status as a discursive role model has been challenged. One such challenge comes from media representation of women politicians of majority and minority origin in written press coverage. By media representation I understand a double-sided phenomenon: a type of symbolic gendered representation focusing on stereotypical representation or on sex specific narrative frames in press coverage and equally on the agency and empowerment which is also part of exposure in the media. The trick is to walk a narrow line between the two approaches of stereotypical representation and political agency based on the media platform. The media serves as a means by which representation can reinforce mental structures for example by negotiation of politics, images and competences (Gomard & Krogstad ed. 2001; Lund 2002). More recent research suggests that women politicians are not simply passive recipients of media representations but can also participate in their construction (here from Childs 2008:143; Ross 2003).

Words count in politics. Through frequent repetition, their effect can be to diminish a woman's status as a good politician. *Media* also counts in politics. The media is not a mirror of society but rather a crucial agent in its construction. This chapter investigates two central question of how 1) women parliamentarians are represented in Danish media in terms of categories of social

differences and 2) in what ways press coverage of women parliamentarians express a type of agency in terms of access and representation in the media?

We look at press coverage of two Danish women parliamentarians in a perspective of intersectionality by which I with Phoenix (2006:22) understand a “conceptual language for recognising that everybody is simultaneously positioned within social categories, such as gender, social class, sexuality and ‘race’. So even when focusing particularly on one social category (such as ‘race’, gender or social class), intersectionality reminds us that we cannot understand the category in isolation” (p.22). An approach of intersectionality to media studies is central as a way of conceptualizing difference. It underlines how categories of difference (as for example ethnicity and gender) can be used for different purpose for different people depending on their positioning. There are only very few Danish media studies of gender and politics, which subscribes to a perspective of intersectionality (important exceptions are Andreassen 2005; 2006, Elg 2005). Research has pointed out that political power, women’s agency and democratic inclusion cannot be understood without examining the media’s role. Even though it has been argued that a gendered nature characterizes contemporary mediated politics [since gender has come to be seen as a relevant peg for media story lines (Norris 1997a)], my point of departure is that gender as well as other difference-making categories such as age, ethnicity and generation play a role in relation to media representation of politicians. A move towards a perspective of intersectionality makes media studies research more complex, more realistic, and more sensitive to cultural contexts (Aldoory & Parry-Giles 2005).

Some of the ways these intersections work in TV-coverage have been documented in a study of the two Danish national TV-channels’ coverage of visible minorities (Andreassen 2005). This study and other studies document how the media employ a particular vocabulary, which tends to stereotype and label women politicians and other groups of women (Andreassen 2005; Bathla

1998; Childs 2008; Eide ed. 2000; Gomard 2001; Gomard & Krogstad ed. 2001; Hagemann & Krogstad ed. 1994; Moustgaard 2004a; 2004b; Norris ed. 1997; Sreberny & van Zoonen ed. 2000).

Tensions between *publicness* and *privacy* and between *visibility* and *invisibility*, identified in the media and the public sphere, are played out, with often dramatic effect, in the realm of discourses on politics and politicians (Fraser 1997; Sreberny & van Zoonen 2000). One central characteristic of the Nordic countries is that majority women politicians in Nordic politics have a certain degree of *visibility* having been part of the political landscape since the 1970s.² This also indicates that there is no supposed anti-thesis of women and politics and no binary gender discourse that constructs men, masculinity and the public domain in a way that differs from women, femininity and the private domain. However, the media seems to form a specific arena regarding gender, politics, privacy and visibility both for women politicians of majority and minority origin. The private sphere is drawn on in media representation both for the women to position themselves and for the media to represent women politicians. What is made visible and invisible in these media representations is put into a historical context. There are some discourses on politics and gender, which are drawing on particular themes, which are feasible or legitimate in certain historical moments and others, which precisely are not. For example, the Danish Conservative Party leader, whose media representation we look at below, while still being an ordinary MP, posed on a car front in an advertisement for a Danish brewery in the mid 1990s and participated in TV- interviews with her new-born baby some years later.

Concerning the power relations in media representation as both repressive and productive, it is worth pointing out that there – to my knowledge - are no studies looking at male politicians in press coverage of Nordic politics nor studies looking at inter-sex comparisons of men and women politicians nor intra-sex comparisons of women politicians in written press coverage (for these categories, see Childs 2008:146).

2. A Framework of Media, Politics and Power

An empirical example of the media's power potential is illustrated by a survey on development in media and politics from 1980-2000 by Danish parliamentarians. The MPs ascribe a significant degree of power to the Danish media institutions. For example, the parliamentarians approach the media as a (problematic) political actor participating in the political game and they ascribe almost as much power to the media as they do to the national government (Jensen 2004: chp.7).

Theoretically, the relationship between media and power has the air of an undetected paradox as both discriminatory and empowering. The power-dimensions of the media are not one-dimensional and it is problematic to treat and talk about the media as a uniform, objective entity, which the media en bloc possess (Slaata 2003). An approach of intersectionality illustrates the complexity of power relations by pointing at the different use of social categories in media representation.

In normative terms, the democratic role of the media has been understood as a forum for a society's collective dialog with itself and about itself (Fiske & Hartley 1978; here from Phillips & Schrøder 2004; Keane 1991). The media has been portrayed as society's school of democracy (ibid) informing the citizens in ways that prepare them for participation and citizenship (Schudson 2005). The media also works as a medium of contact between the politicians and the citizens, as a medium for citizens to get information about society and vice-a-versa as a medium for decision-makers in society to get information about the population. The media establishes the parameters and limits that structure our knowledge and thinking about the social world and creates a significant arena for politics and political participation (Loftager 2003; Lund 2002; Phillips & Schrøder 2004).

This chapter is rooted in a broad concept of politics, pointing out that political power and influence is made up of more than just parliamentary and cabinet seats (Karvonen & Selle ed. 1995). These positions represent what can be termed a deliberative concept of politics in terms of arguments, communication, dialogue and dissent. When so understood, it becomes clear that the ‘political’, in relation to this type of public sphere, is understood as a type of discursive practice (Dryzek 2000; Eriksen & Weigaard 1999; Habermas 1996; Young 2000). Studying media events and media representation is a way of linking a deliberative philosophical framework and media representation in practice. In identifying the media as one of the major sites for deliberative democracy in practice, I focus on the *de facto* ways it contributes to constructing politicians in the media. The terms *media democracy* and *medialising* of politics and of society are used as ways of describing how everything can be framed in agenda-setting terms in the media and be made an object of a public dialogue. *Medialising* refers to the mutual adjustment between the media and political strategies (Waldahl 1999).

In relation to the media, power is considered both repressive and productive. In political science debates, power concepts related to the media have been coined as ‘editorial power’ pointing at editing and selecting of such as events, approaches, agendas and themes as a power dimensions in practice (Lund 2002). One dimension of editorial power is related to the use of journalistic routines for example as linguistic routines employed in describing politicians or executives in private industry elite positions (ibid). Another power dimension is discursive power. When power is deemed productive it is because it is seen to contribute to the production of identities and capabilities for action and to the politicizing of particular situations. Preferences and social phenomena are not static: the exercise of power is linked to the actual attempt to define social reality’s phenomena whose definition is not *given a priori*. Power is not a possession but rather a range of effects, which are produced through political and institutional types of practice. The

meaning and definition of these phenomena is mapped out through linguistic construction processes, which for example contribute to certain understandings of political problems and phenomena (Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Thomsen 2005). Through discourses, the media assists in defining aspects of politics (institutions, political behaviour, legitimate political actors and actions etc).

A specific focus on stereotypical representation in visual images in the media is analysed in relation to bodily dimensions and visibility for the majority and the minority population (Elg 2005). Elg illustrates some of the power dimensions applied to visual images of female politicians and to the distribution of hierarchical differentiations of majority and minority positions in relation to ethnicity and gender.

3. A Perspective of Intersectionality

As mentioned previously, a perspective of intersectionality has not been applied very frequently in relation to studies of gender, politics and media (important exceptions are Andreassen 2005; 2006, Elg 2005), which turns this perspective into a key analytical purpose for my work. Applying a perspective of intersectionality can illustrate not only how gender but equally other diverse, overlapping, interacting social layers defined by age, class, ethnicity, nationality, race and other social differences form constituting elements in media and press coverage. Seemingly, these categories are used in various ways in media representation of women politicians. Gender has been treated differently in the Danish media than other categories such as ethnicity and sexual orientation, if one looks at media representation of female politicians during the 1990s and early 2000s (Moustgaard 2004a; 2004b).

My work is based on the idea that gender, ethnicity and generation /age are central categories of difference and constituting elements in relation to press coverage of women politicians

in the two cases I analyze below. The interplay of these categories creates relations of power, which the individual category cannot create. Using the verbal form of the concept intersectionality – to intersect- illustrates that when the different categories meet then, precisely, this leads to new constructions of meanings.

One argument in the debate on intersectionality is that homogenist and binary thinking reduces women and persons of colour to unproductive stereotypes. Intersectionality is grounded in the thinking that studies of gender is always in relation to categories of ethnicity/ race and class – these are characteristics that work together to define a person's particular subject positions (fx Crenshaw 1994; McCall 2005; Lykke 2005; Phoenix 2006; Staunæs 2003; Yuval- Davis 2005; 2007). Of this follows that it is important to deconstruct the category 'women' and to recognize that social class and 'race' produce both commonalities and differences among women (Phoenix 2006:21). A perspective of intersectionality emphasis differences among groups of men and women and the idea of not treating gender, ethnicity and race as distinct categories. This gives the possibility of *analysing* how socio-cultural hierarchies interact and create inclusion and exclusion on the basis of discursive or institutional categories (Lykke 2005).

Three contested questions are related to 1) methodology, 2) to the status of gender as an analytical category in intersectionality analysis and 3) to the differences in social categories and to how inequalities are connected to these social categories (Verloo 2006).

A recurrent criticism of intersectionality is that, while it purports to be a methodology as well as a theory, it does not have any methods associated with it. Phoenix (2006) contends that methodological insights are being produced (fx McCall 2005) and that intersectionality can be associated with a broad range of approaches at different levels and types of analyses such as looking at identity-politics, post- colonialism etc. Considering intersectionality as a type of approach to

studies of differences opens up the possibility of considering gender as one of several categories of difference working in a particular historical context.

Another central question is what status gender as an analytical category has in analyses based on a perspective of intersectionality. Is a gender perspective 'gender' as in 'men and women' or as in 'women' and in that case, why do we talk about gender and is a gender perspective based on the relation between men and women? (see Yuval-Davis' debate on gender mainstreaming 2005). This seems to be a central question in relation to scholarship of media and politics, which primarily deals with coverage of women politicians. More generally, this part of the debate on intersectionality is sensitive in relation to gender research. It questions one of the 'crown jewels' of gender research – the primacy of the gender perspective in relation to other difference-making categories (Christensen & Siim 2006).

A third point is rooted in Verloo (2006) pointing at central differences between the social categories such as gender, class, sexuality etc arguing that “a ‘one fits all’ approach to addressing multiple discrimination is based on an incorrect assumption of sameness or equivalence of these social categories connected to inequalities and of the mechanisms and processes that constitute them” (2006: 211). In relation to the empirical analysis below, the two categories of gender and ethnicity are very different. Whereas gender is “commonly seen as having two positions that are perceived as originating in nature, in biology” (ibid p.216), ethnicity represents a multiple range of positions. Verloo's point is that inequalities are not equivalent, that social categories are connected to inequalities in different ways and that power struggles between various inequalities will always be present. The importance of Verloo's points is illustrated in an analysis of Danish media narratives on rape and visible minorities in a perspective of intersectionality (Andreassen 2006). Andreassen illustrates how the social categories of difference gender and ethnicity/ race change positions and how their respective significance change depending on the context they are

part of. This changing significance illustrates the fluidity of the categories and their internal relationship. In some cases, the narratives are constructed around gender and in other cases around ethnicity / race.

4. Press Coverage of Women Politicians: Some Research Conclusions

I would like to turn now to present some of the conclusions of research on press coverage of women politicians based on Danish research (Moustgaard 2004a; 2004b) and on British, Canadian and North American data. The overall conclusion is 1) that female and male politicians are treated differently in the media and that female political leaders are mentioned in significantly fewer stories in international news media than their male colleagues (Carroll & Schreiber 1997; Gidengil & Everitt 2003; Norris ed. 1997b; Ross & Sreberny 2000) and, 2) as mentioned above, that the main part of previous research does not apply a perspective of intersectionality in analyses of media, politics and gender. If we for a start apply the double-sided concept of media, power and gender as both discriminatory and empowering/ productive, it is the first perspective, which characterizes most of the previous research.

Some research concludes that the media generally puts style over substance in relation to women politicians. This emphasises the gendered discourses of politics which works as ‘a labelling process’ (*always a women, sometimes a politician*). Representation of women often features descriptions of clothes, hair, glance, motherhood and family. A British study concludes that women get more media attention than their male colleagues but that the attention focuses on age, looks, family, circumstances and fashion. Professional women are domesticated in media representation as journalists insist on locating them only in a feminine domain (Ross & Sreberny 2000; Wahl-Jorgensen 2000). The same conclusions are not reached in a British case study of the

resignation of two female ministers in one of the Blair-governments. The conclusion is that there were few articles referring to the minister's personal and family relations (Childs 2008: 148).

An American study of press coverage in the 103rd Congress (Carroll & Schreiber 1997) investigated women politicians in relation to the amount of attention they received in the media and types of media representation and the conclusion was double-sided: On the one hand, newly elected women received more mentions by name in major papers than their male counterparts. The majority of the stories made their way into the front or national news section which Carroll and Schreiber interpreted as a sign of women politicians being taken seriously. For the most part, the women were portrayed as agents of change making a difference on issues of women's health, abortion, health care reform and violence against women. On the other hand, the analysis illustrated that the media representation was based on gender biased characteristics of the family-work life balance and the sexism of exclusion. One story-line stressed that despite having to struggle against sexism and to juggle family lives and careers, the Congresswomen had made it into politics. Besides, the material did not reveal much mention of women's involvement in foreign affairs, international trade or regulatory reform. The media interests would decrease over time.

In Norwegian news media, women leaders are shown to receive more questions on their private lives than their male colleagues. By analysing political competence, credibility and visibility, Gomard and Krogstad conclude that women in Nordic politics have success in their political communication, but that they are not successfully perceived by TV-viewers / the electorate. Male politicians are favoured and therefore have better working conditions. This is, for example, manifest in the way floor-time is distributed in televised election- debates (Gomard & Krogstad ed. 2001).

The focus on the discriminating side of media representation is also at the fore of a Danish project on press coverage of women politicians, which contains interviews and media

analyses. It does not analyse ethnicity as a source of difference nor consider how the different categories of difference intersect in media representation (Moustgaard 2004a; 2004b). Across parties, age groups and parliamentary experience the female parliamentarians themselves conclude that apart from the media, influence, praise and criticism are reasonably equally apportioned among men and women in Danish politics. This seems to be in accordance with the way British women MPs analyse their own representation in the media (here from Childs 2008: 143 / Ross). However, though about a third of the Danish female MPs report experience of gender inequality within their parties. This is in accordance with Højgaard's study of Danish female and male parliamentarians, analysing their discourses on gender and power in their political life (Højgaard 2001). Moustgaard classifies some commonly employed stereotypes of the women politicians in Danish press coverage as the *blue-eyed blonde*, the *school teacher*, the *handbag* (the Danish Iron Lady), the *mother*, the *witch*, the *ice queen*, the *girl*, the *seductrice* and the *virgin*, the *lesbian* etc. She concludes that the way the Danish media represents the category gender in politics is based on a type of sexualisation of women in the public sphere (Moustgaard 2004a:162). Moustgaard's study presented in ways different from their male colleagues such that there is a greater focus on their appearance and their private lives. In relation to the media, age seems to be a central source of difference so that young female politicians can gain positive publicity which can also become a disadvantage and turned into stereotypes.

5. Methodological Considerations

In a recent analysis of gender, politics and the media, Childs (2008) distinguishes between three approaches to this type of study (the following paragraph is based on Child 2008:142). "The first – symbolic annihilation – examines whether women politicians receive less media coverage than their male peers" (fx Norris eds. 1997b). "The second explores stereotypical representation – "where the

media draw on conventional stereotypes of femininity and politics, such as the public man / private women, or focus on women's appearance". Here Childs distinguishes between stereotyping, "in which individuals are evaluated on the basis of characteristics assumed to be shared by social groups" and gendered frames, "which are the broader narrative within which sex stereotypes may be located (Norris 1997)". The third approach considers 'sex specific narrative frames' (Gidengil & Everitt 2003). "This is where women's sex is the frame for example when women are framed as agents of change (fx Carroll & Schreiber 1997) (see Childs 2008: 142 for this distinction).

This chapter focuses on an empirical study of newspaper coverage of two media events in the Danish written press: the appointment of a new Conservative Party chair woman with Danish majority origin (Lene Espersen September 2008 age 41) in September 2008 and the election of a new Socialist women MP with Turkish minority origin (Özlem Cekic age 33) at the parliamentary election in November 2007. The study is designed as a single case study to provide systematic analysis of the gendered representation of two women parliamentarians which both received a great deal of media coverage. As respectively a profiled Conservative MP and previous Minister of Justice and as a candidate and elected MP with minority origin both politicians were both very exposed in the media. Rather than investigating how *much* coverage they got, I am interested in the nature of their media representation. One focus deals with the range of stereotypes which journalists drew on in their coverage of the political events and another focus deals with the empowering aspects of the media coverage. That is, what kind of platforms / arena did the media form for political profiling in the course of the political events. The time period of the case study is still to be finally decided on but will cover 1) about a week after the appointment of the new party leader in September 2008 and 2) some time before the election of Özlem Cekic in November 2007 to cover the portraits of her in the election campaign and a short period after the election and about a week. The case study will cover the main Danish news papers.

The argument for this particular case study is rooted in the specific historical moment which Danish politics is finding itself in a number of white, majority women are getting to the top of Danish politics as party leaders and chair women on the one side and the country is seeing the first minority women elected into parliamentary politics and a few more minority women in municipality politics. This makes for the case study to provide reliable information about a broader case of women in Danish politics (Flyvbjerg 2001).

6. A Nordic Context

Employing a range of Anglo-American studies as an interpretative framework for analyses based on Nordic empirical materials highlights the difficulties when concepts travel across the world. The above-mentioned research field draws extensively on Anglo-American analyses and derived concepts. There are reasons to reflect upon the grounding of our thinking in a given (Nordic) locality and institutional context and upon our use of imported theoretical concepts, which have often accumulated a lot of academic air miles on their travels (Dahl & Fiig 2005). Gender frames in media can be influenced by dominant norms and values of the audience in a wider society (Norris 1997a). I will try to deal with this by making it one of the key purposes of this article to stress a specific Nordic context. Reflections on concepts and conclusion travelling far seem particularly relevant in the case of media studies focused most noticeably but not exclusively on Anglo-American studies.

The notion of a *context* can be used in different ways. In relation to media studies, a favourite is *textual* analysis – that is close examinations of, for example, popular culture for manifest and subtextual meanings which are linked with social and cultural influences and outcomes outside the text. Such analyses have been termed (con)textual analyses by Valdivia (ed. 1998:123-125). I employ the notion of a context understood in geographical terms pointing at the

Nordic countries and more specifically to Denmark and women in Danish media and politics as an example. The Nordic countries offer a unique context for the analysis of men and women's media representation. Women have been engaged in politics for decades and received a high degree of visibility.

When so understood, it becomes clear that Anglo-American conclusions only partly fit the Nordic landscape of women in politics and the press coverage of women politicians. Previously I have used the term 'contextualization' for the process of analysing a theoretical concept of a public sphere in an empirical context based on geographical parameters (Fiig 2003).

Concerning the Danish case, the distinction between the period *before* and *after* the political mass mobilisation of the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s is instrumental to the analysis of women's political role. Women became more politically active, more left-wing, more tolerant and feminist and rejected the traditional division between men and women. Women's place in society is reflected in the fact that women have gained legitimacy as wage earners on the labour market, as politicians and generally as public citizens. Since the 1970s, a gender dimension has formed an integrated part of political debates, dialogues and discourses and assisted in forming new political identities. Gender equality has become part of a set of general values in contemporary Danish society (Christensen & Siim 2001).

7. Returning to the Second Question

The media play a central role in altering the boundaries of the visible and the invisible and the public and the private for politicians but it seems to happen in ways that do not favour women politicians.

The praise of the Nordic countries' political gender equality has been relatively *colour-blind*. Ethnic minorities are not included in political decision-making on equal footing with

the majority population (Togeby et al. 2003). Migrant women are underrepresented in the Danish political institutions with the exception of the local government councils (see also Fiig 2009). On the basis of the above, I can conclude that this Nordic praise equally has been *media-blind* inasmuch as media stereotyping in some cases seem to work in ways that disfavour women politicians. In other instances, the media forms an arena for political profiling.

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¹ This paper is work in progress. Its original inspiration is the European research-project EUROSHERE - The EU-financed FP 6 project EUROSHERE identifies the factors affecting the articulation of a European public sphere. Aalborg University is responsible for the Danish case study and, in cooperation with other institutions, is responsible for the integration of a gender dimension throughout the project. For more information see: <http://eurosphere.uib.no/index.php>. A note on delimitation of the paper: it does not deal with a range of bordering research topics such as analyses of the way feminism is debated in the media (Fiig 2008a) nor the status of women as professionals or female experts in the media industry (Eide ed. 2000), televised election debates (Gomard & Krogstad ed.2001), televised coverage of women of minority origin (Andreassen 2005) or the ways the citizens as audience talk about their media use and perceptions (Phillips & Schrøder 2004).

² The representation of female parliamentarians in the Danish parliament – the *Folketing* - has risen from 16% women in 1975 to 30% in 1987 and to 38% in 2005. The percentage of women in the municipality councils (the local government) have developed less steadily from 12% in 1974 to 26% in 1989, 28% in 1993 and during the 1990s, the percentage has dropped to 27% (Borchorst & Dahlerup 2003; Fiig 2009).